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## A Veiled Threat: Who's Afraid Of Konca Kurish?

ISTANBUL, Turkey

January, 2000

By Whitney Mason

In the city of Mersin on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, the night of June 18, 1997 was hot and sticky. Orhan Kurish, the son of a prominent local contractor and younger brother of the city's mayor, and his wife Konca, an outspoken Muslim feminist, had been working overtime to finish an order in their small textile factory. At one in the morning they locked the factory and they and a friend named Ayshe, who was helping out with the rush order, got into their Daewoo minivan for the short drive home. Konca was driving. Orhan suggested that they escape the heat by driving to a holiday home some 45 minutes away on the *yayla*, a high plateau that rises from the coast. With five children ranging in age from 7 to 21, Konca said she had too much work to do at home to go away. Three minutes from the Kurishes apartment in the center of town, they dropped off Ayshe.

### ORHAN KURISH WAS THE ONLY WITNESS TO WHAT HAPPENED NEXT.

According to one version of Orhan's account, when they reached the front of their building on a crowded street in the city center, Orhan got out of the van before Konca parked. Three men with handguns emerged from the shadows of a construction site next to their building and ordered Orhan to lie down. The engine



Konca (center) with her Aunt Necla (right) and friend

was turned off. The three armed men got into the van, turned the ignition back on and drove away. Orhan leapt to his feet and, according to several neighbors sitting on their balconies over the narrow street, shouted, "My car is being stolen!" Only then did he notice that the two men were in the front of the van and another was sitting in back, next to Konca.

In the two years before her abduction, Konca (pronounced "Konzha") Kurish had become something of a celebrity, expounding in down-to-earth language and on national TV her unusual views about the place of women in Islam. She was already 35 when the Istanbul press heard about a woman down in sleepy Mersin who was publicly denouncing what she regarded as the misogynist distortion of Islam — all the while wearing a headscarf, which many secular Turks regard as the banner of benighted tradition. For a year and a half after her abduction no one heard a word from her.

Konca's feminism grew out of a spiritual odyssey that led through the heart of Turkey's Islamist movement, including a group connected with Turkey's branch of the notorious Hizbullah. After her abduction the police and much of the Turkish press immediately suggested that Konca had fallen victim to some of her radical former comrades who were enraged by her latter-day liberalism. Yet after 18 months of investigation, no hard evidence tied any Islamist group to the crime.

Konca Kurish had shocked Turks, religious and secular alike, by daring to criticize the prevailing interpretation of women's role in Islam not as an outside critic, but as a devout Muslim. Her abduction illustrates how Islam has managed to maintain its conservative cast despite the diverse forms it assumes among its one billion adherents: in many Muslim communities, those who dare challenge the status quo are smothered. The case also casts a light on the murky world of Islamists in Turkey, where a military-dominated regime has alternately used the most zealous Muslims as scapegoats for the country's ills and henchmen for the state's dirty work. Because she tried to rise above factionalism to bridge the worlds of feminism and Islam, which are traditionally opposed, Konca was tragically isolated. And yet rare though she may be, Konca's indomitable integrity and courage reminds us of the creative potential of Islam and of humanity in general: within the head of the most traditional-looking provincial housewife, we have no inkling what subversive thoughts may be churning. In other words, don't judge a woman by her cover.

My interest in Konca grew out of conversations with Perihan Magden, a novelist and columnist for *Radikal* newspaper, who remarked just after the abduction that it was emblematic of Turkish partisanship that Konca had been largely abandoned both by Islamists and feminists. Intrigued, I talked with a few people about the case and a year after the kidnapping walked down to Istanbul's

Women's Library, housed in a historic domed building in the dilapidated Fener district along the Golden Horn. The librarian handed me a stack of clippings about Konca's case, filed under "women and religion," most of them from just after her disappearance. Many highlighted suspicions of the radical Islamist group Hizbullah, of which Konca was believed to have been a member. They mentioned that at the time she was abducted her husband's brother was mayor of the Mediterranean city of Mersin, where Konca also belonged to a group called the Independent Women's Association, known by its Turkish initials as BKD.

A few weeks later I found myself in the BKD office in a gimcrack concrete building off a bustling street in the center of Mersin crowded with small shops selling everything from computers to dried fruit and nuts. My translator for that first meeting was a tall, pretty student of political science at Bogazici University whose father refused to let her help me a second time for fear of her getting mixed up with "Islamists." We were received by Konca's Aunt, Necla Olcer (pronounced "Nedzhla Uhlcher"), a plump 50-something socialist and atheist with short hair dyed red and a striking young woman named Ayla Oran. Ayla, a secularist who had co-founded the BKD, briefly chaired the Mersin branch of the intellectual, leftist Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP) and



*Ayla, Konca's friend and co-founder of the Independent Women's Organization, often cried when talking about Konca.*

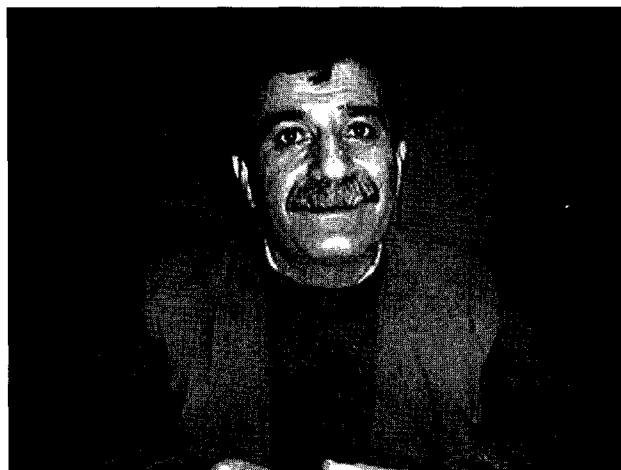
ran a successful advertising agency with her sister, counted Konca among her closest friends. As we pondered Konca's fate over the next few days, Ayla often had to fight back tears.

Konca's mother's grandfather was an Arab from Beirut. Her father's father was an "Arab Kurd" from Urfa, an ancient trading city on Turkey's border with Syria. Her mother's father was from Cyprus and her mother's mother was a Turkmen, a recently settled nomad, from a town an hour west of Mersin: in other words, a typical Mersin resident. As one local journalist told me, "Mersin is like the UN — the cemeteries are full of people from all the cultures from the former Ottoman Empire." Konca's father worked as a shop foreman in a steel parts factory. Like many members of Turkey's urban working class, the family was politically left-leaning and staunchly secularist.

Konca was 14 when she visited the home of a classmate whose father, Abdullah Kurish, had moved from the Black Sea region and become one of the city's leading contractors. He was also a devout member of a *tarikats* (or Muslim brotherhood) of the secretive Nakshibendi tradition. Young Konca promptly fell in love with her friend's brother Orhan, then a handsome 16-year-old. The young couple wanted to marry immediately but their families, representing opposite poles of Turkish society, opposed it.

Following a time-honored tradition among thwarted young lovers in Turkey — and establishing an early precedent of challenging patriarchal authority — Konca and Orhan ran away together for a night and slept together. The next day the teenagers presented their fathers with the *fait accompli*, leaving them with only two alternatives consistent with the families' honor: to consent to their marriage or kill them. Both fathers reluctantly gave their blessings and the teenagers wed.

This was the last concession Konca was to wring from Abdullah Kurish for many years. Living under the Kurishes roof, Konca was required to wear the *bashortu*, a scarf that covered her head and shoulders, and to respect the other rules of strictly observant Muslims. Having pre-marital sex in order to force her way into a traditional family may seem paradoxical, but for an infatuated teenager from a secular family it certainly constituted an act of romantic rebellion. When she was 18 the Kurishes took Konca to the small city of Adiyaman in the far east of Turkey where she was inducted into the



*Faik Bulut, a PLO-militant-turned-journalist, calls Konca an Islamic modernist.*

Nakshibendi *tarikats*. "That trip to Adiyaman was a real turning point," recalled her aunt Necla. "Before she went Konca followed the rules only from fear of the Kurish family, but when she came back from Adiyaman she was a real believer."

The Nakshibendi, one of Turkey's best-known *tarikats*, has always been distinguished by its contempt for outward expressions of piety and by its strict adherence to the *shariat*, Muslim holy law. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Nakshibendis' orthodoxy made the *tarikats* popular among Ottoman officials looking for a way to rally the declining empire around the flag of Islam. "This unity was to be promoted by strictly following prophetic usage (*sunna*), 'checking bad innovations' and making rulers and their appointed delegates responsible for keeping to this line," writes sociologist Serif Mardin.<sup>1</sup>

Faik Bulut is a well-known journalist and critic of Islamist militants who received his political education in the early '70s as a volunteer for Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization and spent several years in an Israeli prison after being captured in combat in Lebanon. In 1983, according to Bulut, in the first elections since the 1980 coup, the Kurish family's sect threw its support behind a new party founded by General Turgut Sinap — the former head of counter-guerrilla operations in the Special War Department. In future elections members of the sect supported the far-right Nationalist Movement Party and later the MHP's Islamist offshoot, the Greater Unity Party. After a murder attempt against the sect's

<sup>1</sup> With the ascendancy of the secularizing Young Turks in 1908, the Nakshibendi acquired a reputation for reactionary subversion that grew to flamboyant proportions during the early years of the Turkish Republic. It was a Nakshibendi magazine editor who in 1909 inspired a revolt among religious privates and non-commissioned officers against the Young Turks in Istanbul. In 1925, just two years after the founding of Atatürk's secular Republic, a Nakshibendi sheikh in eastern Anatolia led a rebellion against the new government in Ankara, after which all *tarikats* were banned. Five years later another Nakshibendi near the Aegean city of Izmir called on Muslims to destroy the impious Republican regime. Since the 1970s the Nakshibendi have moved back toward the center of Turkish life, claiming among their adherents Necmettin Erbakan, the godfather of Islamist politics in Turkey.



*Konca's son Yahya has his mother's energy. With her gone, he's the father around the house.*

leader, Resit Erol, investigation of the crime was thwarted. "Before the PKK [the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Movement] arose in the mid-eighties, Adiyaman was a big center for MIT [Turkey's intelligence agency]," said Bulut. Taken together, these facts lead Bulut to believe the sect had deep ties with Turkish intelligence.

However conservative Konca's sect may have been, she resisted the traditional predilection of Nakshibendis and, for that matter, of most devout Muslims of any stripe, to insulate themselves from non-Islamic influences. Her friends and family in Mersin and Istanbul describe a serious, impassioned woman who enjoyed nothing more than reading and discussing the myriad subjects that fall under the heading of religion. Photos show a big woman with a smooth, rather somber face, looking in her headscarf like a traditional Turkish housewife.

"We can't say Konca was looking for radical groups," her brother Mehmet told me in Istanbul. "She was searching for her own explanations and was always open to talking to socialists and Kemalists," (proponents of Turkey's reigning secularist republican ideology.)

With his mother gone, 22-year-old Yahya now manages the family's textile business. "I'm the father around the house," Yahya told me matter-of-factly. "My father has no mind, he just talks. He has the mentality of a five-year-old." His mother's intelligence was like this, he says, karate-chopping the air above his head, and his father's like this, chopping toward his knees.

After five years with the Nakshibendi, Konca became close friends with a number of people involved with the extremist Islamist group Hizbullah. Subsequent events

linked Konca's friends with the violent Ilim wing of Turkey's Hizbullah. It seems likely, however, that Konca was never a member in good standing. First, Hizbullah is a group of thugs with no formal membership rolls. More importantly, Konca always deplored violence. "From 1993 to 1995 Konca was so conflicted about Hizbullah," recalled her brother Mehmet. After the PKK attacked a Hizbullah member in Mersin and a friend of Konca's in the group told her he'd killed a guerrilla in retaliation, Konca condemned the killing and broke her ties with the group.

During her Hizbullah period, Konca donned the full-length black shroud that leaves only the face exposed, known in Turkey as a "*charsaf*," that is worn by only an ultra-conservative fringe of women. Konca's circle of Hizbullah members opposed intermediaries between worshippers and Allah, like *tarikats*. More radically, her group accepted only the Koran as a source of religious authority. This entailed rejecting the thousands of collected quotations of the Prophet Muhammad, known in Turkish as "*hadis*," which constitute the basis of most of Islamic tradition and law.

Konca had always been close to her aunt Necla and had helped to raise her son, Ulash. During the Hizbullah period, though, Konca would never remove the *charsaf* in Ulash's presence or so much as touch him. Yet despite this conservative turn, Konca remained happy to debate her newly radicalized faith with her equally atheist relatives. "She would go over the Koran line by line trying to convince us," recalled her aunt with a sad smile. Necla would counter by pointing out the inequitable treatment of women in Islam, arguing, for instance, that the *charsaf* eclipsed a woman's individuality. Necla, herself a victim of domestic violence, especially challenged Konca to explain Islam's approbation of violence toward women.

At the same time Konca was continuing to read thinkers who most Islamists would consider threatening, including Marx and Darwin. Konca became convinced that evolution was compatible with a faithful, if figurative, interpretation of the Koran — a view that her family and friends believed might have led to her abduction. One writer she read during this period who had a particularly strong influence was Turan Dursun, a former imam-turned-atheist who had been murdered in 1991. A chapter in Dursun's study of Islam in Turkey, *This is Religion*, entitled "The Lies of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and the Subjugation of Women," typifies his provocative line. Dursun describes how in 1989 a member of parliament had asked the Department of Religious Affairs to comment on a recently published book that had attributed the following 13 char-

acterizations of women to the Prophet Muhammad:

1. A woman's testimony is worth half a man's.
2. Women are less capable both intellectually and spiritually.
3. Bad omens can be house, horse or woman.
4. Four things that spoil prayer — pig, dog, donkey and woman.
5. A virtuous woman is like one white crow among hundreds of black ones.
6. After me, I haven't left any more harmful conflict than women.
7. I have seen the people in hell and most of them were women.
8. A woman appears to humans as Satan.
9. Woman is like a special kind of bone: if you try to mend it, it will break.
10. Men are masters and for that reason Allah made them superior to women.
11. Women in their men's hand lose their freedom.
12. If a man is full of wounds and a woman licks his whole body, it's still not enough to compensate for the trouble she causes.
13. A hand's *zinna* (contamination) is a hand's touch: whatever man touches a strange woman, on Judgement Day his hand will be filled with two hot coals. To be beaten with an iron rod is better than to touch a woman.

In its response to the MP, the Directorate of Religious Affairs struck a conciliatory tone, arguing that most of these views were distortions of Mohammed's message, which was essentially one of liberation. Dursun said balderdash: Islam's attitude toward women was reactionary to the core and pretending otherwise was a dangerous lie.

After reading Dursun, Konca slowly began to come around to her Aunt Necla's view that a just God could never approve of the subordination of half his creatures. But since on some level her faith remained intact, Konca concluded that the misogynist tone of Islam must be the result of usurpation and manipulation of religious authority by men intent on maintaining their privileges.

Though her formal education had ended with middle school, Konca had studied Arabic on her own, and now she began to reassess the translation into Turkish of various *ayets* or verses of the Koran that concerned women. One of the first to concern her is the verse traditionally cited as allowing a Muslim man to beat his wife (sura 4, verse 34): "Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them excel the other and because they spend their property. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them."

In this context most Muslim scholars have  
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interpreted the word "scourge" ("*darb*" in Arabic) to mean "beat." According to Necla, Ayla and her brothers, Konca argued that "*darb*" could also be interpreted as meaning to punish in a non-physical way. Contrary to the Turkish press's descriptions of Konca as a "writer," her writing was in fact limited to notes made for her personal reference. We can guess, however, that Konca's thinking ran along lines similar to that of Moroccan feminist scholar Fatimah Mernissi. In her *Women and Islam* (which has not been translated into Turkish and her family and friends are sure Konca had never read) Mernissi quotes the Koranic exegesis of some of Islam's most esteemed scholars to support her argument that *ayets* like the one about beating represent concessions that Muhammad made only reluctantly when his misogynist lieutenants threatened to revolt:

"The Prophet said: 'Do not beat women.' And in fact people renounced it. And then Umar [a hard man who was Muhammad's top general and became the fourth caliph] came looking for the Prophet and said to him: 'Messenger of God, women are rebelling against their husbands.' The Prophet authorized them to beat them, but he said: 'A crowd of women is gathered tonight around Muhammad's family. There are seventy women who have come to complain about their husbands.' The Prophet was always against the beating of women and people used to say to him: 'Prophet of Allah, they [the women] are sowing disorder. The Companions still did not understand why the Prophet acted with such clemency, not to say weakness; he told them: 'Very well, beat them, but only the worst ones among you will have recourse to such methods.'"

Faik Bulut, the former PLO militant and journalist, rejects the Turkish press's dubbing of Konca as an "Is-



Konca's Aunt Necla, an atheist and victim of domestic abuse, challenged Konca to explain women's second-class status in Islam.



lamic feminist.” Bulut instead argues that Konca is “a model of postmodernist Islam” in the tradition of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a famous 19<sup>th</sup>-Century critic of the Islamic establishment and his protégé, Muhammad Abduh. Abduh, who became mufti [chief religious leader] of Egypt, “preached the compatibility of revelation and reason, condemned the blind following of tradition, [and] championed the legitimacy of and need for a reinterpretation of Islam to respond to the demands of modern life... He was also an early champion of legal and educational reforms to improve the status of Muslim women.”<sup>2</sup>

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When Konca met Orhan some 24 years ago Mersin was best known for its oranges and lemons. Along with fishing, the citrus orchards were sufficient to support a population that then numbered only about 200,000. According to local journalists, Mersin had always been governed by respect for diversity, not extremism. An Italian Catholic church stands near the port and another near the statue of Ataturk in the city center. In addition to Turks and Kurds, Mersin is home to Arabs and Armenians.

By 1985 the insurrection by the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Movement (PKK), had prompted a stream of migrants into Mersin from the war-ravaged Southeast. The stream turned into a flood in 1987 when Mersin established the first free-trade zone in Turkey. Today Mersin has eight times as many neighborhoods as it had 30 years ago, and its population has risen to half a million within the city itself and 1.5 million in the greater metropolitan area.

The influx sparked a construction boom, with high-rises sprouting on reclaimed land up and down the Mediterranean coast. Among the contractors who benefited was Abdullah Kurish, father of Mersin’s mayor Halil and his younger brother Orhan. From the road along the shore these newish high-rises give Mersin an air of quiet prosperity. The shoreline is dominated by a Hilton hotel, and Mersin’s smart set while away the warm summer evenings over drinks on a tall-masted ship in Mersin’s marina and at beachside bars in developments along the coast outside town.

The economic boom was as short-lived as it was shallow. The economic benefits of the free trade zone fell far short of many migrants’ inflated expectations. But there was still money flowing through Mersin’s port, which had become the biggest in Turkey, and its refinery, the country’s second largest — both on the strength of trade with the Middle East, especially Iraq. Then in 1991, with the economy already struggling to support the swelled population, the Gulf War erupted. Under pressure from the U.S., Turkey respected a blockade against Iraq, pulling out the keystone of Mersin’s economy.

The impact of this disruption becomes obvious in the migrant slums a few blocks inland from the palm-lined shore. Nearly all traffic in the area is pedestrian and all the women wear headscarves. Mafia barons reputedly rule the area. Many of the migrants have hardly risen above the poverty of their villages. Unemployment these days runs at 25 to 40 percent and no one in Mersin seems to know where economic recovery might come from. Uncontrolled development and insufficient sewerage led to ruinous pollution of the once-beautiful coastline near the city, seriously limiting the potential of tourism. Most of the recent immigrants from the Southeast are uneducated and show little interest in changing that: in the last several years mosque construction has far outpaced that of schools.

\* \* \*

As he drove his brand-new Alfa Romeo sedan along the waterfront, a friend of Ayla’s named Kemal, a wiry, British-educated computer expert who works in Ayla and her sister’s ad agency, told me about his own brush with the mafia. Not long after Konca was kidnapped, Kemal’s mother was abducted by a group of men who forced her at gunpoint to sign a check for \$150,000.

“Of course the kidnappers could never negotiate a check written under duress like that,” I said naively.

“That’s not true,” said Kemal. “The bank cashed the check before she was released and insisted we cover it.”

“Didn’t you retain a lawyer?” I asked incredulously.

“All the lawyer did was arrange a \$20,000 bribe in exchange for which the judge persuaded the bank to settle for just \$100,000 — so we “saved” \$30,000. And then the lawyer, seeing we were in a vulnerable spot, demanded a bribe for himself.”

\* \* \*

It was in this hotbed of corruption and lumpen Islamism that in 1993 Konca organized the first Congress of Islamic Women at the Mugdat mosque in Mersin. At this point Konca was still wearing the full-body *charsaf*, which put her in a tiny minority with the most traditional Muslim women in Turkey. But her message was already becoming revolutionary: that Islam had been hijacked by men more interested in maintaining the hegemony men enjoyed in pre-Islamic Arabia than in the liberating message of the Prophet Muhammad. Konca used the forum to launch what amounted to a direct assault on the theological basis of men’s domination of Muslim society. Konca argued for eliminating, as a source of religious authority, all words and actions attributed to Muhammad. In one fell swoop this would nullify most of the elements of Islamic tradition most prejudicial to women, including such damning lines as “Those who entrust their affairs

<sup>2</sup> *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, pgs 57, 58, John Esposito, Oxford University Press, 1995.

to a woman will never know prosperity!" and "The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*" (an object representing the Ka'ba, the structure housing Islam's sacred Black Stone in Mecca).

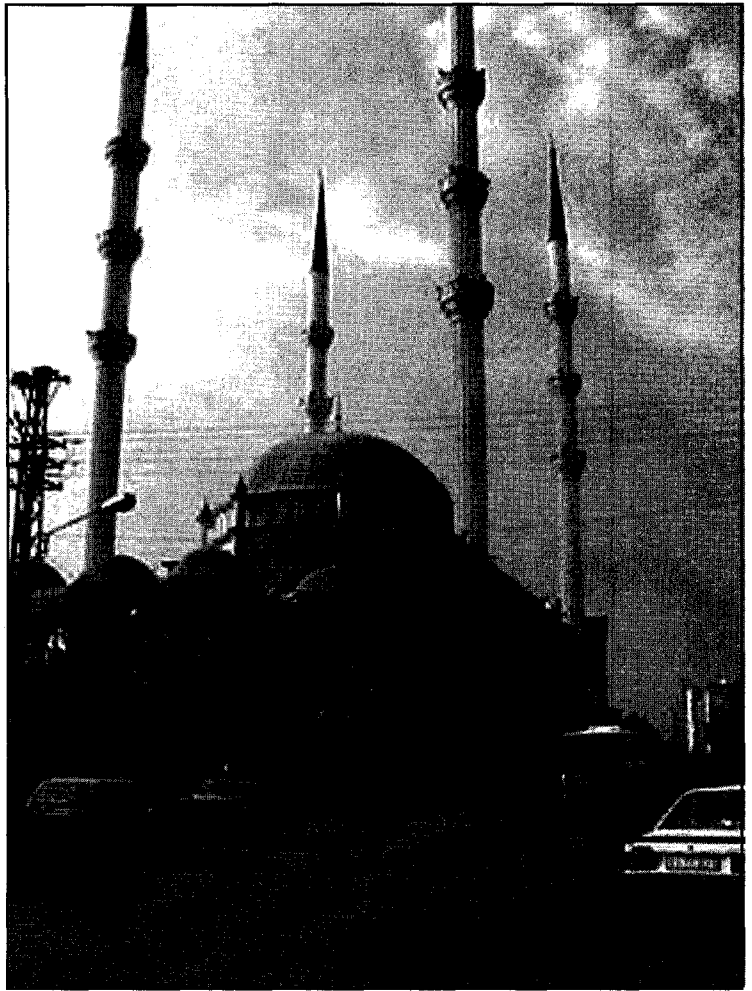
Her critique of *hadi* theology led directly to a rejection of much of Islam's prevailing practice. Besides arguing that the Koran does not in fact allow a man to beat his wife, Konca said it doesn't allow polygamy either. Though the Koran explicitly allows a man to take up to four wives, it stipulates that he must treat them all equally; Konca (like Turkey's Alevi religious minority) reasoned that since equal treatment of different wives is practically impossible, polygamy is too.

Konca's pronouncements caused an uproar among the more than 1,000 devout Muslims attending the conference; at one point people started throwing chairs. After failing to gain support for her views from other Hizbullah members, Konca left the sect. Six months after the Congress she exchanged the *charsaf* for the much more common and less severe-looking *bashortu*, a scarf that covers the head and neck.

After leaving Hizbullah, Konca joined a small movement called *Meyal* ("Meaning"), which brought together Muslims who were dissatisfied with orthodox Islam and sought the "pure" meaning of the Koran. Like the founders of Hizbullah, the fathers of *Meyal* were university graduates who admired the Iranian Revolution. Unlike their Hizbullah coevals, *Meyal*'s founders visited Iran in the early years of the revolution and came away deeply disillusioned. Many abandoned Islam altogether and became liberal secularists.

The *Meyal* leader with whom Konca seemed to have had the most contact was Ercument Ozkhan. Before helping to found *Meyal*, Ozkhan had spent several years in prison for starting a Turkish branch of a group called Hizb Ut Tahrir, a supranational Islamist party founded in the 60s by a Palestinian living in Jordan. After prison Ozkhan began to travel around the country, leading discussions about the Koran that resembled the Bible studies of fundamentalist Christians. Men and women in *Meyal* would meet together and discuss the Koran on an equal footing and, unlike adherents of Hizbullah, didn't shun physical contact with one another.

In 1995 Konca was invited to an Islamist congress in Tehran where she met Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and his wife and daughter. According to her



*At Mersin's Mugdat Mosque, Konca held Turkey's first congress of Islamist Women.*

brother Mehmet, Konca told Khomeini's daughter: "As Muslim mothers we don't want to see blood or mothers' tears in the Middle East, so Iran should make peace with Israel and the United States as Gorbachev did. Iran should be politically reliable." In a speech to the congress Konca said the ayatollahs of Iran misused *shariat* (Islamic law) to maintain their own monopoly on power. Women in the audience gave her a standing ovation and later Iranian students sought Konca out at her hotel and said that they agreed with everything she'd said but that they could never discuss their thoughts openly in Iran. At the congress she met an African-American Muslim woman who drank a forbidden beer with dinner. Konca was impressed by her liberalism and became convinced that Muslims should tolerate drinking, pointing out that the popular Bektashi sect in Anatolia and the Balkans — who like the vast majority of Iranians are Shi'ite — drink wine.

On her return to Turkey, Konca gave a television interview in which she committed what many Turkish Islamists would regard as the ultimate apostasy: she embraced the view of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the secular Turkish state, that religion must not be

mixed with politics. This separation of religion and government, so natural to Christians, is an idea still novel to Islam in which, until the later half of the twentieth century, worldly and religious power had always gone hand in hand.

Soon after her return from Iran and embrace of Kemalism, the leader of Meyal, Ertugral Ozkan, died. At his funeral Konca insisted on performing the *namaz* or prayers, together with the men, in defiance of Sunni Muslim custom. For devout Muslims this already marked a radical break with tradition. But Konca went further: she led the prayers herself. In Sunni Islam a female *hoja* (prayer leader) is as common as a female Catholic priest.

In 1997 Konca and her aunt Necla were invited to Ankara to participate in a meeting of feminists called the Capital Women's Platform. After the meeting a female theologian who had heard Konca's speech in Ankara and sympathized with her ideas came to Mersin with some well-intentioned advice: Shut up. Turkish society wasn't ready to hear the things Konca was saying, the woman told her; 75 years after the founding of the secular republic, it was still "too early" to challenge men's hegemonic role within Islam. Konca, according to her Aunt Necla, replied: "Someone has to start saying these things and I'm willing to do be the one." Konca also suggested that the female theologian consider retranslating the Koran, arguing that the Muslim holy book needed to be interpreted by someone free of patriarchal bias.

Not surprisingly, her husband and father-in-law opposed Konca's liberal views. But, according to Necla, Konca changed their minds. "I know your religion better than you do." Konca reportedly told her husband's family that it didn't say anywhere in the Koran that a woman should wear a *bashortu*, much less a *charsaf*. Her aunt said the men respected Konca's intensive reading and eventually they came to accept many of her views.

The claim that the Kurish men found Konca's arguments persuasive, while possible, would be surprising, to say the least. Contending with rationalistic arguments for reforming Islam is nothing new for members of the Nakshibendi orders, and a patriarch's duties are clear.

"The most difficult stage of withdrawal [from worldly life]," writes sociologist Sencer Ayata, "concerns emotional ties, which are strongest in primary relations... The household head should remember that his responsibility is first to God and only then to his family. He should force (for there is use of force in Islam) those under his authority to live and practice Islam thoroughly: wife, children, sons who disobey should be rejected and sent out of the house at once... Not to commit

sin, the believer should renounce both the traditions of society and the laws of the state."

\* \* \*

If there was a single person who transformed Konca from provincial eccentric to national celebrity it was Hakan Aygun, the evening news anchor of the populist Star TV channel. It was Aygun who first presented Konca to a live national audience and interviewed her a total of three or four times. "There was some detail about her in the newspaper that caught my eye: that she wore a headscarf and was a feminist," recalls Aygun. "Being an Islamist and feminist struck me as interestingly paradoxical. I found out she was living in Mersin and invited her to do a live interview in Istanbul." Konca's appearance was provocatively scheduled for the beginning of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting.

"When she was my guest on a program called "Nightline," the earth shook. That night I got a 40 percent share — the highest ever. She received a lot of criticism and at the same time a lot of compliments. The very next day she was on the show again, but this time debating with people with opposite views." Among those who condemned her publicly were Abdurrahman Dilipak, an Islamic columnist with the newspaper *Akit*; and Emine Senlikoglu, Turkey's best-known radical Islamist woman and the President of the Martyrs' Mothers' Association, a group whose members' sons had died fighting the PKK in Southeast Turkey.

"By being more understandable than most women," says Aygun, "she received more attention. She explained everything to the public very simply, as opposed to the academic way of explaining things. The Islamists who reject secularists' criticism of Islam regarded Konca as one of them since she wore a headscarf." Konca under-



*In the streets back from Mersin's coastal road, money is scarce but headscarves are common.*



stood the importance of this symbol. "Just to be heard," says Aygun, "she continued to wear her scarf, even while saying that it wasn't a religious obligation, because she thought her words would be more effective coming from a covered woman. This was the first time Islamists saw a religious woman supporting secularism."

"Actually Konca is a housewife," says Aygun. "For many years as a classical Turkish woman, she lived with her husband's family's pressure and under that pressure she wore a headscarf and practiced a religious life. But eventually she got to know Islam and the obligations of prayer and fasting and began to practice them of her own will. Since she loved Islam, she began to study it and read different views on it. She was influenced by Turan Dursun, who was killed by an assassin. But not by how Dursun thought that Islam was silly, but by his original understanding of the practice of Islam. For instance, that according the Koran, women are not obliged to veil and are not second class citizens. And when she looked in the Koran, she found that Dursun's criticisms had merit. As for herself, she had begun to propagate these views to the public."

"The view of Konca as a simple, regular woman is mostly true, but only from the view of her educational background. She wasn't a religious intellectual at all, but she also wasn't typical, because she was questioning. In my opinion, she was more effective than most of the Islamists' male opinion leaders. Sometimes a nation needs somebody who will say the emperor has no clothes. So in this role, she was a very important personality."

"Kemalists welcomed her views about how Islam denigrates women. Even some leading Islamists supported her views on this, particularly because they believe that the Koran's position on women is misunderstood. A group of Islamist women who were veiled but were tired of being oppressed by their husbands liked her as well, though they disagreed with her, saying that the headscarf was not a requirement from Allah. The main people who disliked Konca were Islamist men. They made a loud response. Then she started to receive death threats. But at the same time there were many women kissing her on the streets."

Konca's brother Mehmet drove her to Istanbul for the interview and witnessed the anger it evoked. Among other progressive positions she promulgated, Konca denounced "jinns and pixies and other supernatural nonsense" that many of the most traditional Muslims in Turkey still believe in. Calls poured into the station, many from Turks in Germany, repeating the laconic chorus: Shut up. Aygun asked Konca whether she was afraid. "Every bullet fired at me," she answered, "is fired against the Koran, because I say nothing but what is in the Koran."

Abdullah Kurish, the prominent patriarch of her

husband's family, also received angry calls. According to Necla and Ayla, the Kurish patriarch told Konca privately that he agreed with her but that people weren't ready to understand. Konca responded by doing more interviews in which she pulled no punches.

In the middle of June 1998 Konca and her Aunt Necla went to Ankara to attend a conference held by an NGO called The Hope Foundation. The same *Radikal* reporter who had interviewed Konca the year before for *Milliyet* newspaper was now working for Channel 6 TV and asked her for a television interview. During the half-hour interview, Konca followed her customary procedure: first she read an *ayet* from the Koran, then she analyzed it linguistically and historically and finally rendered the conclusion that according to the best interpretation of the text, the Koran didn't really say that we are descended from Adam and Eve.

When Konca and her friends and family watched the interview on the 8 o'clock news they were horrified. All her references to the Koran and careful explanation had been cut and the only byte Channel 6 aired was Konca stating the conclusion: "We are not descended from Adam and Eve." After airing this single sentence pulled out of context, the anchorman glowered into the camera. "The reaction," he said, "is up to you."

Konca immediately called the station and asked for a copy of the cassette; the station refused. Konca asked them to air more of the interview in the midnight news so viewers would understand that her conclusion was based on a careful reading of the Koran. "Someone could kill me if you don't air that," Konca said. Channel 6 promised they would air the explanation, but the midnight news played exactly the same provocatively bald clip as they had before.

Immediately after this broadcast, according to Konca's friends and family, she began to receive death threats. Her husband and father-in-law both demanded, "What is she saying?" Even her 18-year-old daughter Sira asked what was going on. Konca believed that the reason she'd never been attacked before, despite all the denunciations, was that she'd always supported her position by referring to the *ayet* from the Koran. Now that this defense had been stripped away in Channel 6's editing suite, for the first time Konca felt terrified that she might be killed.

During the next weeks Konca had too much work completing a big order at the textile factory to have time to go on national TV to explain her statement about Adam and Eve. Meanwhile she continued to receive death threats on the phone. One of her critics, the Martyrs' Mothers' Association president, Emine Senlikoglu, asked Konca what she'd been doing before a discussion program on which they'd appeared together. Senlikoglu repeated that Konca had told her that she'd been at a

concert; Senlikoglu said that her going to an entertainment when there were suffering people in the world proved that Konca had no social conscience. At one point soon after the broadcast three men came to the factory and Konca's son Yahya saw them quarrel before Konca physically threw them out. Three days and exactly one month after the Channel 6 interview, Konca was kidnapped.

\* \* \*

Neighbors didn't hear a sound from Konca before she was driven away. Konca's family and friends found this odd: she weighs nearly 200 pounds and everyone who knew her agreed that she wasn't exactly timid. Her silence led some to speculate that she may have been acquainted with her abductors.

The police launched an investigation with help from three special agents from Ankara who spent 15 days in Mersin. The officers immediately voiced suspicions of Hizbullah. In the absence of other leads, and conveniently fitting the group's sinister image, Hizbullah's responsibility quickly took on the aura of conventional wisdom. An assistant to the mayor told me: "Konca was kidnapped because she expressed ideas about Islam and criticized a group of which she'd been a member. No one can criticize Islam — that's the problem in this country." I asked the city hall official whether anybody had ever suspected the Kurish family. "Oh, I wouldn't know anything about that," he said, grinning in embarrassment and looking down at the floor.

In shock immediately after his mother was kidnapped, Konca's son Yahya blurted out to reporters that he suspected Hizbullah. He changed his mind almost immediately. His mother was privately critical of violence when she was involved with Hizbullah, Yahya said, but she never publicly said anything against the group. Hakan Aygun, the anchorman, agreed that Hizbullah was probably a red herring. He thought Hizbullah had generally kidnapped people in order to brainwash them and then release them. Aygun also believed Hizbullah wouldn't kill a woman because they don't believe that women have any place in the Islamist struggle.

Rusen Cakir, a reporter for *Milliyet* newspaper and CNN Turk whom many people had recommended, as an expert on Islamists in Turkey told me the suggestion that Konca could be a pacifist Hizbullah member was oxymoronic. The seed of what became Hizbullah in Turkey, Cakir explained, took root among intellectual admirers of the Iranian Revolution just before the army coup of 12 September 1980. The founder of Hizbullah in Turkey, Huseyin Velioglu, had studied political science faculty at Ankara University — the alma mater of Turkey's most famous insurrectionist, Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Movement (PKK) who has been convicted of terrorism and sentenced to hang.

Along with other religious students from the Southeast Velioglu returned home and, with help from Tehran, began organizing a group to agitate for the imposition of *shariat*. Hizbullah opened bookstores throughout the Southeast that were used to disseminate propaganda and as gathering places by the militants. In the first years they were occupied only with developing their ideology.

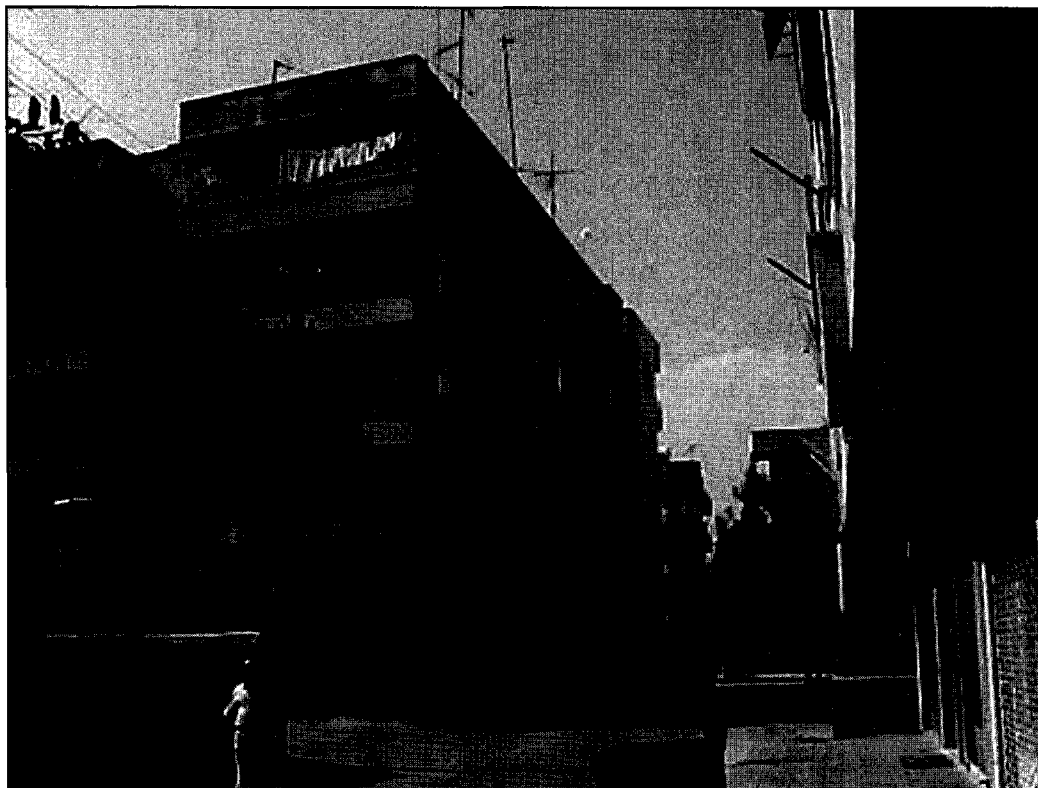
In 1992 the PKK declared the "Serhildan," the Marxist separatists' equivalent of the Palestinian intifada. Abdullah Ocalan declared a "liberated zone" in the Southeast. Not surprisingly, the PKK didn't want to share power with Islamists and determined to push Hizbullah out of the region. The PKK launched its campaign by bombing the house of an imam who was a prominent Hizbullah leader. The imam wasn't home but the attack killed both his parents instead. In revenge Hizbullah killed an Assyrian Christian whom they believed to be working as a courier for the PKK. The PKK retaliated by killing the Hizbullah chief whose parents they'd already mistakenly killed.

The state responded by attacking the guerrillas directly with army and special police units. The tit-for-tat murders, meanwhile, sparked an oblique war between Hizbullah and the PKK in which Hizbullah attacked not guerrillas but hundreds of local community leaders — doctors, lawyers, teachers — who acted as a bridge between the fighters and the population. Hizbullah's favored *modus operandi* was to fall on the professionals as they were leaving home for work early in the morning and hack them to death with meat cleavers.

It was at this stage that state security forces began looking for opportunities to use Hizbullah for their own purposes. Recent trials have revealed that many supposed militants were actually undercover policemen. A lawyer for accused militants has said that police forced Hizbullah to do their bidding. During the four or five years that Hizbullah was at war with the PKK, moreover, police allowed the group to get away with anything. The few killers who were arrested were released without charges being filed. "It is certainly true that the Hizbullah has been manipulated by the police," says Cakir, "but we can't say they're a tool of the police. The extent of their collusion depends on the local situation."

In 1996 the conflict between the PKK and Hizbullah died down only to be replaced by internecine fighting within the Islamist group that killed about 50 people. The two factions, headquartered in eponymous bookstores, were called *Ilm* ("Science") and *Menzil* ("Target"). While *Menzil* had tended to be less active against the PKK, the groups' antagonism is based primarily on the rivalry of their respective leaders.

For most of its existence, Hizbullah had used the big cities in the west only as logistical bases and avoided violence that might alarm security forces. Despite this for-



*The street where Konca was abducted. Konca and Orhan's apartment is the second floor from the top on the left.*

bearance, a couple of years ago the state began cracking down on Hizbullah. The group responded by moving west but, at least until recently, hadn't perpetrated violence there. Said Cakir in December: "If Konca were kidnapped by Hizbullah, it would be their biggest operation outside the Southeast."

Though the information may not have reached Istanbul, Konca's family told me in September that Hizbullah had been connected with several other attacks in the city of Taurusus, just a half-hour drive northwest of Mersin. Two teachers were killed for "socialist thinking." And a former Hizbullah member was abducted, escaped, and then was hunted down and shot in front of a butcher's shop. In February 1999 an imam from the nearby city of Taurusus was kidnapped after refusing to allow Hizbullah to hold meetings in his mosque. According to Konca's brother, police told him that a suspect arrested in that case said he'd seen both the imam and Konca and both were still alive.

In any case, if Konca's family is right when they say that Konca never approved of violence, Cakir said he couldn't believe she had ever belonged to the group. In Lebanon or Iran, where Hizbullah is a political party, it might be possible for a person to oppose violence but support Hizbullah. "But in Turkey," says Cakir, "Hizbullah means violence. They reject any kind of legal political activity. The group has no system of review for internal discipline and no central publication. Its support-

ers care little about theology and a basic knowledge of Islam is sufficient. What really matters is praxis," that is, violence.

Konca's son Yahya, 22, obviously takes after his mother. "I don't fear anything," says Yahya, his body almost arcing with electricity. "I only have respect for God and I wouldn't hesitate to do whatever was necessary to rescue my mother. But there's no evidence, not a single clue." After the abduction he felt "crazy" and drove around the hills outside Mersin with a Smith & Wesson pistol and rifles. When we met in September, Yahya told me he felt police had been lazy and slow in their investigation. Though they promised they'd find his mother, Yahya never really believed them. A year after his mother's abduction, police told him they'd interrogated 600 suspects without turning up a single lead.

The police's record is not encouraging. According to the most recent statistics available from the State Security Court, Turkey entered 1999 with 18,390 unsolved missing persons cases, including 1,625 that had occurred the previous year. In the Adana court, whose jurisdiction includes Mersin, 44 people went missing in 1998, bringing the total of open cases in the area to 227.

In Konca's case, though, the police began with a head start. The director of Mersin's anti-terrorist unit, a friend of the Kurishes, had ordered his team to prepare Konca's file "in case she was kidnapped" — one week before it

actually happened. But from that point on the Mersin police department was kept in a state of continual turmoil, the result of a frenetic procession of new police chiefs appointed by Icel Governor Halil Cin, who, like Mersin's mayor and Konca's brother-in-law, Halil Kuris, belonged to the center-right Motherland Party.<sup>3</sup> When Konca was abducted, the anti-terrorism director was one of eight senior officers from the Mersin department who was on vacation. Nine others — including Police Chief Tuncay Yilmaz — had just been transferred from the department and had not yet been replaced. In the next year it seems that Governor Cin couldn't make up his mind about who he wanted to be Mersin's police chief. First he appointed Hayrettin Gok, then replaced him with Haluk Bahcekapi, then brought back Yilmaz, then Gok again. Yilmaz is now head of the national police academy in Ankara.

While the police labored under their rotating leaders, Konca's family and the Kurishes consulted with a medium and the police indulgently looked where the seer directed. The Kurish family also organized a posse of 20 cars full of men from the Black Sea region who did their bit by driving around the area with guns. Despite this dramatic performance, the Kurishes never appeared to Konca's Aunt Necla to be overly upset by Konca's abduction. Perhaps, Necla mused, Black Sea people are just less demonstrative than those from the Mediterranean. "They say they're very sad," said Necla, but they also say: "We warned her. We wished she hadn't talked so much. If she'd listened to us, this never would have happened."

Both Konca's brothers, Ekrem Gench, 25, and Mehmet Gench, 40, rushed from Istanbul, where they are living, back to Mersin as soon as they heard their sister had been taken. Naturally they went first to Orhan Kurish. Hayrettin Gok, police chief number two, later told Mehmet and Ekrem that in his initial questioning, Orhan Kurish had changed his story about what had happened that night seven times. The first version included details about Konca's accoutrements and the model of the kidnappers' guns — strange, considering that it happened in the dark.

Mehmet and Ekrem reckon that Konca's husband told them three versions. In the first he said that one guy with a gun had approached him, ordered him to hand over the car keys and lie down and then kicked him in the back of the knees, making him crumple. Another man approached Konca and likewise ordered her to lie down. "Why should I?" Orhan says his wife replied. Orhan then amended this account to say that two men approached him and ordered him to walk ten meters away before

lying down. It was from this position on the ground that he said he saw two men with Konca. Orhan first said Konca had fainted before being hustled into their minivan, suggesting that perhaps the kidnappers had used chloroform. In the next version he said he saw the back of her head above the back seat as they drove away, implying that she must have been conscious. The night after the abduction Orhan was interviewed on ATV and said, referring to the gunmen who had emerged from the construction site next to their building: "My *friends* told me to lie down." Orhan also said his "friends" had told him to hand over his car keys.

There is disagreement about who called the police after the kidnappers drove off with Konca in the Kurishes van. Konca's aunt Necla understood from Orhan that he first called his brother Halil, the mayor, who then called the police. Others say neighbors called the police immediately, first, based on what Orhan had shouted, just to report that his car had been stolen. Minutes later neighbors reportedly called to say that Konca had been kidnapped. When I asked Mersin's police chief who first called the police, he said, "Orhan, of course."

"Funny," I said, "I'd heard that Orhan called Halil and it was Halil who actually called the police."

"What difference does it make whether it was her husband, her brother-in-law or a neighbor who called first?" demanded the chief, glaring at me suspiciously. He refused to discuss the case further. "Would your FBI discuss an ongoing investigation?" he demanded rhetorically.

No one else, apart from Konca's family and friends, seemed anxious to talk about her, either. After an initial flurry of reporting in July and August 1998, the case was shrouded in a silence compounded of fear, elitism, sectarianism and willful obstruction. Necla and Ayla and other friends of Konca's from the Independent Women's Association wanted to mount a publicity campaign. The Kurish family rejected the idea, arguing the publicity might provoke the kidnappers to kill Konca. Many representatives of the groups that might be expected to feel most anxious to see the case solved — Islamists and feminists — have reinforced the silence, claiming that her supposed heresies proves she isn't one of them. "There are still people who call themselves feminists who say that this is an Islamist issue and has nothing to do with feminism," her Aunt Necla told me. Several self-proclaimed feminists in Istanbul whom I've asked about Konca have confirmed this. Few women's organizations in Turkey would admit a woman who wore a headscarf; even in the Independent Women's Organization, several women

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the openly Islamist Virtue Party, the Motherland Party is the one most closely linked to Islamist circles in general and the secretive Muslim brotherhoods in particular. Korkut Ozal, the bother of the Motherland Party's late founder, President Turgut Ozal, was a known to belong to a Nakshibendi lodge and the president himself is widely believed to have been a member as well.

quit in protest against Konca's admission.

Conversely, many Islamists say the kidnapping lacks the significance required to rise to the august level of "an Islamist issue." Abdurrahman Dilipak, the well-known columnist who had railed against Konca in the conspiracy-theory-driven Islamist newspaper *Akit*, became visibly annoyed when asked repeatedly about her. "I don't think she was kidnapped for her Islamist views. I'm sorry — as a human being — that she disappeared, but for Islamists she didn't matter at all. She just became popular all at once and she didn't have a serious knowledge of Islam. 'Public engineers' kidnapped her as a public game being played with Islamists. But she wasn't at all important," he repeated. An adviser with the Islamist Virtue party has expressed a similarly disparaging view.

Hakan Aygun, the TV anchorman, understood that Konca hadn't achieved a level of respectability that might afford her some measure of protection. "In terms of media and politicians she wasn't a strong, powerful or essential person. Her absence wouldn't shock Turkey. She hadn't become respected by those on top. The national elite and the elitist media were thinking she was common. For them she was merely a bit of color."

At the time Konca was abducted one well-known Muslim thinker who seemed to be expressing similar views, albeit in less strident tones, was Yasar Nuri Ozturk, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Istanbul University. Yet when I called him to request an interview about Konca, Ozturk refused. "I have nothing to do with Konca Kurish," he said. "This is a political issue of which I have no idea and on which I have no view, so obviously I can't talk about it. You can discuss it with the police."

Konca's brother Mehmet called some friends in the Interior Ministry to ask for help with the investigation: the friends found the case spooky and didn't want to discuss it.

The kidnappers themselves, by contrast, seemed to have been anything but spooked. They chose a time and place when they knew that on a warm summer's night many people would be sitting out on their balconies, within earshot if Konca had said anything. According to her son Yahya, several neighbors told him that they'd been afraid to talk to police but had heard shouting from the street. Orhan's account of the crime suggests that they were very efficient. And they drove the van at a moderate speed and stopped before they'd gotten very far: the vehicle was found the next day just two kilometers from the Kurishes apartment.

Konca's younger brother Ekrem first suspected MIT, the Turkish intelligence agency, partly because the command to Orhan to lie down seemed more their style than terrorists'. In the brothers' first meeting with Halil Kurish, moreover, the mayor accused MIT. By a strange co-

incidence, Konca's hairdresser was the girlfriend of the local director of the intelligence agency, which works domestically as well as abroad. The hairdresser was one of only two people — not including Orhan himself — who knew that Konca would stay in the city that night instead of driving straight from work to their mountain cabin. The second person was an old friend from Konca's Hizbullah days, named Turkan, who'd called Konca on the morning of the abduction and asked about her plans. A few days after the kidnapping Mersin's chief of police took Orhan Kurish to Turkan's apartment to demand face-to-face whether he knew anything about his wife's whereabouts.

On their first day back in Mersin, Mehmet and Ekrem met with a friend of Konca's named Yilmaz Kilic. Like Konca, Kilic had been a member of both Hizbullah and Meyal, as well as doing a stint in the army and belonging for a time to the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party or MHP. Though normally relaxed, Kilic looked panicky when asked about Konca. He immediately told the brothers that Konca had been kidnapped by Hizbullah. He explained in detail how the operation would have been carried out, where they would have transferred Konca to a second vehicle, and other details that gave his view an air of credibility. Kilic said that immediately after the abduction he had gone to the police and told them his suspicions. The police denied to Mehmet and Ekrem that Kilic had ever been to the station. "Is Kilic an informer?" Ekrem demanded. The police just laughed and said they didn't even have a file on him. Since Ekrem and Mehmet knew that Kilic had been arrested during turf wars in Mersin between the PKK and Hizbullah, this merely added to the brothers' suspicions.

This past June Ekrem received a call on his cell phone. On the other end he heard a recording of a woman's voice crying out in the distance then a man cursing, "I can't get her in the car," apparently intended to sound like a recording of Konca's abduction. The number of the other phone appeared on Ekrem's phone and he gave it to the Mersin police to trace. After three weeks they told Ekrem they still couldn't place the number. Ekrem then phoned a friend who works as a bank inspector. He was able to find the name of the number's owner immediately. It belonged to the Kerem Construction Cooperative. The number, according to the computer record the bank inspector found, was used just twice — once to call Ekrem and once to call Izmir.

Two days later, at 12:55 a.m., Ekrem received another mysterious call from a man. An hour later the same man phoned ATV, where the call was transferred to a reporter named Mehmet Guc, who was covering Hizbullah. The mysterious caller told both Ekrem and Guc that his group had abducted Konca, taken her to Adiyaman (where she had first been inducted into the Nakshibendi 20 years ago), judged her for her



supposed offenses against Islam and shot her.

The caller said Konca hadn't deserved to die and he was now feeling guilty. He wanted to reveal his story to the public and to be arrested in Mersin. And, he said, "Before I'm arrested, I want to meet you." The man proposed meeting the following evening at six in front of the Ulusoy bus company counter at Mersin's main bus station. Guc rang Ekrem and they agreed to go together.

While the two were on the plane, the self-declared kidnapper called ATV and sobbed to Guc's boss about the agony of his guilt. When Ekrem and Guc arrived at the bus station, they discovered that Ulusoy doesn't operate in Mersin. Though Ulusoy is one of Turkey's biggest and best intercity bus companies, it mainly serves the Black Sea region. Ekrem guesses that the caller chose the Ulusoy office for his fictional meeting place because, like the Kurish family, he was from the Black Sea region.

Mehmet called Faik Bulut, the former PLO militant and journalist, and asked him for a meeting to discuss where his sister might be held. Bulut told him that she may have been taken to Iran or, more likely, was on her way to Lebanon. If that was the case, she would first be taken either to Gaziantep, an increasingly conservative city on the Syrian border, or to Konya.

In the last week of 1999 — just two weeks after I talked with Rusen Cakir — police accused Hizbullah of

abducting three Istanbul businessmen connected with a moderate Islamist benevolent foundation called Zehra. On Sunday, January 16, a heavily armed police assault team raided a house on the Asia shore of the Bosphorous. In the course of the raid the police riddled one militant with over 30 bullets. The dead man was later identified as Huseyin Velioglu, leader of Hizbullah's violent Ilim wing. Amazingly, police captured the other two militants not only alive but unscratched. The captured militants immediately led police to another Hizbullah hideout in a poor part of Uskudar, a neighborhood down the shore at the entrance to the Bosphorous. Inside police found the decomposing bodies of ten missing businessmen tied in the fetal position who had apparently been buried while still alive. They also found a pile of victims' documents, including Konca's ID, and hundreds of videotapes, one of them a 14-minute recording of Konca tearfully apologizing for having left Hizbullah. Hizbullah gunmen apparently taped their interrogations of those they kidnapped and showed them to Velioglu, who would then decide whether to issue a *fatwa* or legal decree ordering their execution.

Police launched raids all over the country, yielding more horrors: a week into the dragnet the body count from Hizbullah houses in several cities stood at 31. Police found four bodies in the basement of a luxury villa in the conservative central Anatolian city of Konya. Seven centuries ago Konya was home to the sufi mystic Jelaladin Rumi, one of the world's most celebrated ecumenical re-



*At Konca's funeral, the Kurish family patriarch, Abdullah Kurish, greeted mourners after trying to defy Konca's wish to have women and men pray for her together.*



*Front page newspaper photo shows Necla's daughter Sirma grieving over her coffin — in defiance of the Islamic custom of women being at the back of the mosque during funeral prayers.*

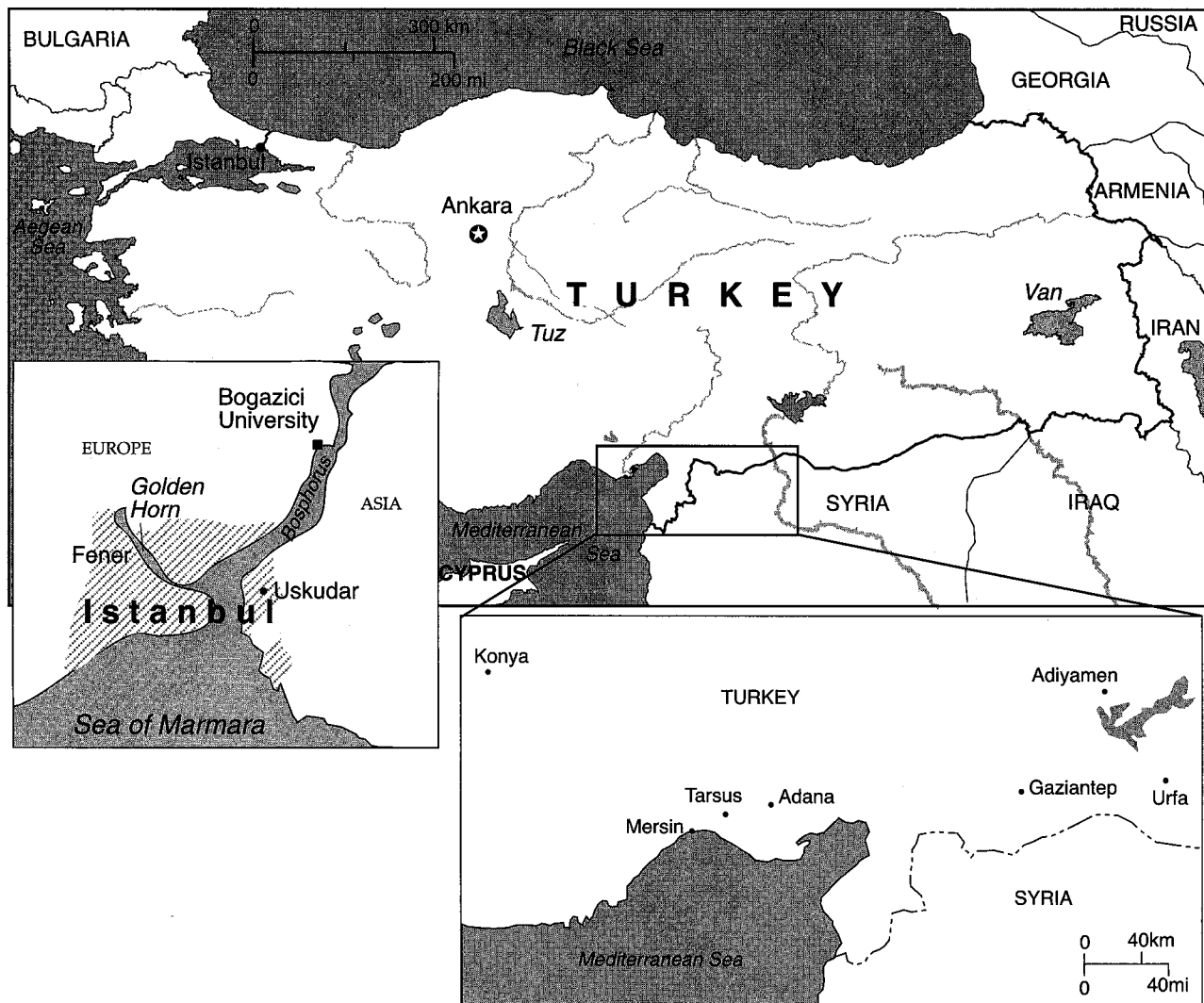
ligious figures and champions of tolerance; even then, Rumi's own followers murdered a wandering mystic whom they believed to exert excessive influence on him. More recently Konya has been known as the fortress of the succession of Islamist parties led by Necmettin Erbakan. Mehmet and Ekrem traveled to Konya along with the family dentist and confirmed that one of the corpses was Konca's.

After a friend called and told me about the discovery I felt strangely crushed by news that, after all, wasn't unexpected. I rang Ekrem and asked whether he'd mind if I attended the funeral in Mersin, which was scheduled for the next day. He said I'd be very welcome and told me to call him when I got to Mersin. At 7:20 the next morning I was on a plane bound for Adana. By ten I was scanning the headlines at a newsstand near Konca's parents' home when Yahya and Ulaş came to collect me. After we'd greeted each other with kisses on the cheeks Yahya demanded brusquely: "You read about Konca in those papers?" I confessed that I'd read the front-page story about his sister. "Lies," Yahya said. He was referring to claims that she'd been tortured. The papers made many other mistakes too, one of which was to designate Konca a "writer." The truth is that the only writing she ever did was notes for her own reference. The press felt obliged to dignify the public statements that provoked her murder by implying she was a professional intellec-

tual when in fact she was something much more original: a mother of five and small businesswoman with an extraordinary passion for truth and justice.

We walked back to Konca's parents' small apartment and joined a crowd of about 100 mourners, men and women, from fashionable young bohemians to elderly men in skull caps and women in headscarves. As older women wept loudly in the other room, I sat in the kitchen with Ekrem, Konca's daughter Sirma and her niece Umut. Umut pinned a piece of paper on the breast of my parka that all the mourners wore. Under a photo of Konca were the words, "Konca, you won't be forgotten." She and Sirma taped artificial rosebuds to an enlarged picture of Konca that had just arrived from the photo lab. I overheard something about women about performing the funeral namaz with the men, as Konca's will requested, and asked Umut whether anyone had cleared this with the hoja. "I don't think we have to ask anyone's permission," Umut said innocently. "We'll just do it that way."

It was an unseasonably warm day and we walked to the Mugdat mosque, where Konca had first made public her incendiary ideas about women and Islam. Security was tight. After passing through a cordon of gendarmes who patted us down and inspected our bags, we climbed the steps to the mosque's sun-drenched courtyard as if stepping onto a floodlit stage. Indeed, television cameras



aimed at the crowd from behind the Konca's coffin while sharpshooters stood on the roofs of the surrounding apartment buildings. But the danger came not from the outside, but from the inner circle of mourners within.

At least a thousand grim-faced people, ranging from chic young bohemians to older women in headscarves and men in skullcaps, milled about in the dazzling sunlight, uncertainly facing the far side of the courtyard where Konca's coffin lay. After about 15 minutes the hoja, wearing a distinctive white, round hat appeared next to the coffin. He called out that it was time to prepare to pray. "Men to the front, women to the back," he shouted. A cry rose of protest immediately from the crowd. Konca's brothers, standing in different parts of the courtyard as if commanding separate regiments on a battlefield, shouted out with an air of invincible command: "Nobody's going anywhere. Konca died struggling to overcome customs like this. We'll all pray together."

The mourners stood their ground, men and women mixed together. Konca's daughter Sirma, her Aunt Necla and Necla's daughter Umut pressed forward toward the

coffin. Abdullah Kurish, standing next to the hoja, said that it was unIslamic for women to be at the front and to perform the *namaz* along with the men. Ekrem told me later that the Kurish patriarch had agreed to honor Konca's request for a mixed funeral prayer but flinched at the last moment, mortified at the prospect of losing face among his conservative friends and family. Konca's nephew Ulash, meanwhile, lost his temper, rushed screaming at the elder Kurish and had to be restrained. As Abdullah Kurish and the hoja protested feebly, Konca's female relatives draped themselves on the coffin, while her non-religious, humanist brothers answered with the implacable tones of men doing God's will. Faced by legions of people who loved and respected Konca, there was never any doubt that Abdullah Kurish would lose this contest. After a couple of tense minutes, the hoja bowed to the inevitable and intoned the funeral prayers to the mix of women and men, as Konca had wanted.

Ekrem and his girlfriend and I jumped into a friend's pickup for the ride to the cemetery. Konca's remains were laid to rest in a cemetery full of pines which, as no fewer than five people pointed out, is the only burial ground in all of Tur-

key to bear the bones of Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Later that day Ekrem told me forensic experts had determined that Konca had been killed in May after nine months in captivity. He also saw a 14-minute video tape of Konca tearfully admitting her "mistake" in abandoning Hizbullah. The tape also indicated that Konca had resisted disavowing her beliefs for over a month. Unlike most of the others killed by Hizbullah, who had either challenged the group's authority or been targets for extortion, it seems Konca was killed solely for her unorthodox theological views. Ekrem thought that perhaps Hizbullah had intended eventually to release Konca. But in April a police antiterrorism squad had infiltrated Hizbullah's organization in Konya and found the corpses of two other kidnapping victims and Konca's kidnappers may have decided to eliminate her before fleeing the area. She was buried in her headscarf. Ekrem repeated,

as Yahya had said, that her body bore no ropes, no bullets or other metal, no signs of torture. Ekrem believed, perhaps hopefully, that Konca had been poisoned.

As I write this final paragraph, many questions remain unanswered. The Islamist Virtue Party is making common cause with leftwing intellectuals in accusing state security services of protecting, if not directing, Hizbullah. The National Security Council has retaliated by accusing the Islamist party of helping to enflame the religious militancy that resulted in the killing spree. Further investigation may well reveal more about links between the state and this band of murderers. But for Konca, the battle is over and compared to most of us who pass through the world with our heads bowed in deference to received wisdom, she triumphed. Said a smiling Ekrem after her funeral: "She was buried as she wanted to be and I feel very relaxed." □

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